

**Pennsylvania Senate Testimony**  
***CTE Teacher Shortage/Crisis in Pennsylvania***  
**Leon Poeske**  
**March 15, 2022**

Hello. My name is Leon Poeske (“pay-ski”) and I am the Administrative Director of Bucks County Technical High School and the current President of the Pennsylvania Association of Career and Technical Administrators, PACTA. Thank you for allowing me to speak about our teacher crisis.

We need your help. As you know, we are at the beginning of a shortage of educators in Pennsylvania and throughout the country; and we know it is only going to get worse. We are already seeing the effects of staffing shortages. Schools are unable to get enough teachers and substitutes to safely and effectively hold school. I realize that the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened this problem, but this issue will remain long beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. There have been a few days this school year whereby some of the Bucks County districts have had to close a building or classes because of staffing shortages. My own school was extremely close to closing on two occasions this year. Think about this, schools have had to close because they did not have enough teachers or substitutes to safely hold classes for students. This scenario does not include the bus driver shortages, school nursing shortages, and the mental health concerns among our students that are affecting school daily.

In 2011, Pennsylvania issued about 21,000 Level 1 teaching certifications. Nine years later, in 2020, Pennsylvania issued a little over 7,000 certifications. ***This is a two-thirds decrease in new teachers available in the Commonwealth.*** As I speak to my colleagues and superintendents throughout the state, finding teaching candidates is getting more and more difficult; and finding career and technical teachers is even tougher.

As a career and technical center (CTC), the recruitment and retention of teachers is especially challenging. Many students that our CTCs educated and trained are now in the workforce making good family-sustaining wages. These are our welders, electricians, carpenters, nurses, automotive technicians, IT and cyber-security people, and others. In many regions in Pennsylvania, such as suburban Philadelphia, these people are making over \$100,000 a year, and maybe \$60,000-\$70,000 in a “bad” year.

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In Career and Technical Education (CTE), we compete for these same people by enticing them with “a chance to work with kids, mold young minds, and train the future workforce” while receiving good health benefits while making \$50,000 or less in some parts of our Commonwealth. Even worse we tell these candidates that after 15-20 years and after earning a master’s degree, they may be able to make \$100,000, depending on where you teach in the state. This shows the large discrepancy in salaries that makes hiring quality teachers even more difficult.

Most new CTE teachers do not enter the teacher profession with a teaching certificate or a bachelor’s degree. They may have been laying shingles yesterday and in a class of students tomorrow. New CTE teachers must enroll in teacher education courses once hired. Depending on the bargaining agreement of the specific CTC or district, teachers generally have to pay 50% or more of the tuition costs. This does vary from school to school, and reimbursement rates are not consistent. For example, one school only reimburses their teachers \$50 per credit up to three (3) credits totaling a mere \$150. On the opposite end, my school will reimburse new teachers up to \$6,000 for up to nine (9) credits. To put in perspective, the current cost for a typical three (3) credit course at three institutions that CTE teachers attend cost between \$1,400 at IUP to \$2,400 at Penn State.

Not only does a new CTE teacher make less than what he or she can make in their field, in many instances, they are spending out-of-pocket money to become a state-certified teacher. Regardless of how admirable the teaching profession is (*and as an educator, I do feel it is a very admirable career*), the pay and benefits are just not commensurate to what they could make in their industry. Again, I realize that the pandemic has exacerbated many labor shortages and pay variables in *all* sectors of the economy, but we are now at the tip of iceberg with the consequences of this teacher shortage.

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I have a colleague in the western part of the state, and he has had a teacher vacancy for so long that he is considering closing the class. The class enrollment is strong, the career pathway leads to family-sustaining wages, but because he cannot attract a person with the necessary technical skills, he is considering closing the doors to the students. This will then inevitably lead to a worker shortage in that industry.

As the president of PACTA, I have become more involved with this issue and have discussed with my colleagues some of the causes for the teacher shortage, specifically in CTE. As I stated, pay is probably the biggest impediment to attracting new CTE teachers. But another problem is what we mandate new teachers to do become fully certified – many times at the new teacher's expense. The unreimbursed cost of tuition is something I already highlighted.

Another impediment to having people enter the teaching pipeline in CTE is that there is no reciprocity among neighboring states and Pennsylvania for a vocational teaching certification. I know there is reciprocity for many academic teaching certifications, but not in CTE. I recently spoke to a culinary teacher who I see as a true "master teacher" in his craft. He taught in Maryland for ten (10) years and was named Teacher-of-the-Year during his time there. Then, he and his family decided to move back to Pennsylvania. He assumed that teacher certification in Pennsylvania would be a relatively easy path given his experience, however, this was not the case. Not only did Pennsylvania not honor his Maryland teaching credentials and certificate, but he had to start from scratch in Pennsylvania's teacher training process. He had to take and pay for education and CTE courses and sit for a competency exam. Fortunately, he did remain in Pennsylvania for the school that offered him the job. He is now finishing his master's degree and is a great teacher, training young aspiring chefs and food service workers to enter the food industry. This is a positive outcome, but he is the exception to the rule. There are many potential teachers and/or new teachers that do not even venture down this path due to the cost and requirements.

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Another hurdle for new CTE teachers is having to take and pay for a competency exam even though a review of their credentials and work history, clearly demonstrate competency in their field. One example would be an automotive technician who is a master mechanic and would like to teach at a CTC. Before the technician can secure an emergency teaching certification, the person must sit and pay for a competency exam/assessment even though he or she has earned the title "Master Mechanic" as proven by her 8-10 industry certifications. This additional cost and time prevents some potential teacher candidates from considering teaching, since they have already earned the industry qualifications and the required work history.

Keep in mind that CTE teachers must have at least four years of relevant work experience in order to obtain a teaching certificate. As an administrator at a CTC, I want experienced candidates teaching and training future technicians, but somehow, we need to examine how we can streamline the process and regulations that have been put in place to attract strong candidates who are willing to remain in the CTE teaching profession.

Obviously, increasing teacher salary is one area to consider, but this is difficult since increasing salaries will have a huge impact on school budgets. With the rising cost of equipment and supplies needed at our schools, I struggle to keep my budget within the Act 1 index. Supplies like lumber, electrical materials, metal for welding have increase in cost dramatically over the past few years. Increasing teacher salaries would help solve the shortage, but I must balance those salaries with the costs of supplies and goods needed for the educational experience.

I began this testimony by asking for your help. As state legislators, there are some things I ask you to consider. One idea may be to reduce or ease some of the requirements to become a CTE teacher. Many states have less stringent requirements, so maybe it is time to examine if these could work in Pennsylvania. Second, consider allowing reciprocity with other states for teacher CTE certifications. Third, maybe

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consider some sort of tuition support or forgiveness program for teachers – both academic and technical teachers. PACTA would be happy to sit down and discuss any ideas to recruit and retain CTE teachers.

We need your help to solve this problem. The teacher shortage will only continue to get worse. If we do not do something soon, schools throughout the Commonwealth may need to reduce class offerings. Given the success Pennsylvania has had with its CTE programs throughout the state, reducing course offerings will hurt our kids, our future workforce, and our economy.

Thank you.

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